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ABSTRACT

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to teachers' classroom language as a variable in the formal learning process. The language used in class by teachers assumes additional importance in formal second language learning situations, where the target language as used by the teacher is not only the means for conveying content, but also a product of the underlying linguistic system to be acquired by the learners. The present paper reports on research which attempted to determine whether foreign language teachers' classroom speech is syntactically different from their speech among linguistic peers. The syntax of samples of the classroom language of eight TESOL teacher-trainees teaching adult English as a second language (ESL) courses was analyzed. Six measures of syntactic complexity were used. The subjects' classroom language was compared with samples of their speech among peers. In addition, the effect on syntactic complexity of two variables--the level of the classes and the times during the ten-week courses at which samples were collected--was examined. The data as measured by all six dependent variables indicate a process of syntactic simplification in the classroom language. Results suggest further that the degree of syntactic complexity was relatively stable over the ten-week period and that the syntactic complexity of the classroom speech varied as a function of the degree of proficiency the students were assumed to have. Implications of the findings for the formal second language learning process are discussed. (Author/AM)

THE SYNTAX OF ESL TEACHERS' CLASSROOM LANGUAGE: A PRELIMINARY REPORT*

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to teachers' classroom language as a variable in the formal learning process. The language used in class by teachers assumes additional importance in formal second language learning situations, where the target language as used by the teacher is not only the means for conveying content, but also a product of the underlying linguistic system to be acquired by the learners.

The present paper reports on research which attempted to determine whether foreign language teachers' classroom speech is syntactically different from their speech among linguistic peers. The syntax of samples of the classroom language of eight TESOL teacher-trainees teaching adult ESL courses was analyzed. Six measures of syntactic complexity were used.

The subjects' classroom language was compared with samples of their speech among peers. In addition, the effect on syntactic complexity of two variables---the level of the classes and the times during the ten-week courses at which samples were collected---was examined.

Implications of the findings for the formal second language learning process are discussed.

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the role of language in the formal learning process. The rationale for this research activity was stat· effectively by Aschner (1961) and is worth repeating here:

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> ...language is both the instrument and vehicle of teacher-student interaction. Observation of classes at work, from the primary grades through the high school, at least, reveals that the day-to-day activities are sustained almost entirely in talk, back and forth between teachers and students...whenever class is 'in session,' that is, whenever teacher and class are working together as a group, their activities are essentially and typically verbal...Few indeed are the acts of teaching that entail no verbal dimension, that proceed without some verbal interplay between teacher and students. For just as the act of teaching, however else defined, is an effort to induce learning, so is the language of teaching a taproot for learning (Aschner, 1961, 113).

The crucial role which the classroom language of the teacher can play in determining the effectiveness with which students learn and in shaping attitudes toward the formal educational process has been stressed by Labov (1969) and Bernstein (1971-5). Recognition of the importance of classroom language has led to the development of tools such as the Flanders Interaction Analysis System (Flanders, 1970), which focuses on the effect of teacher-student verbal interactions in encouraging or inhibiting subsequent verbal initiative by students.

Nowhere, however, can a stronger case be made for investigating teachers' classroom language---particularly in its linguistic dimensions---than in foreign language instruction. In the foreign language classroom, the language of the teacher is not only the means for conveying content, but also a product of the underlying linguistic system to be acquired by the learners. The questions a teacher asks, the ways in which he/she responds to learners' utterances, and the explanations and instructions which he/she provides are overt models of how the target language is used---"an instantaneous application of the subject matter, a model illustrating and reinforcing the information transmitted in the instructional process" (Henzl, 1975, 3).

Indeed, in areas where contact with speakers of the target language is minimal or unavailable, the classroom language of the foreign language teacher may represent the major part of the raw linguistic data to which learners are exposed in spoken form. The language used by the teacher in the foreign language classroom may in fact prove to be far more important than any text or other instructional material in determining the pace at which and the extent to which students develop proficiency in the target language. In addition, fundamental questions about the nature of formal second language learning---for example, the extent to which the language learner sues his/her teacher as a model in building his/her own linguistic repertoire---can be answered only when the linguistic dimensions of teachers' classroom language are known.

The study to be reported on in this paper investigated the classroom speech of a group of teachers of English as a second language in an attempt to determine whether these foreign language teachers' classroom language was syntactically different from their speech among linguistic peers. The study also examined the classroom language of these teachers as it varied over the duration of the courses they taught and according to the level of proficiency which their students were assumed to have.

The present study involved a total of eight subjects. The subjects were teacher-trainees enrolled in a Practicum course offered by the Program in Applied Linguistics at Indiana University. Three of the subjects were highly proficient nonnative speakers of English who had had some experience teaching English in their home countries. The others were native speakers of English whose prior teaching experience was quite limited.

The subjects taught adult ESL classes as part of the Practicum course requirements. These classes, which are offered each semester, meet hourly four evenings a week for a period of ten weeks. In the Fall of 1975, when the data for the present study was collected, instruction was offered at four different levels. Each of these four levels was taught by two teachers, who shared the teaching responsibilities equally. It should be mentioned that the subjects were given a great deal of freedom in making decisions about curricular goals, teaching materials and techniques, and classroom management practices.

Each of the subjects agreed to let the researcher tape three of his/her classes: one each at the beginning, middle, and end of the ten-week period. In addition, the weekly meetings of the Practicum class, in which the subjects and their instructors discussed general and specific problems and approaches in teaching English to speakers of other languages, were taped so that samples of the language which the subjects used with each other---that is, among linguistic peers---could be obtained.

From each of the twenty-four classroom tapes, a 500-word sample was selected for analysis. In each case, the sample consisted of the first 500 words contained in sentence-length utterances spoken by the teacher during the actual class period. For the baseline language data collected in the Practicum class meetings, the first 500 words spoken in sentence-length utterances by a subject to the class as a whole and with the class' attention constituted the sample for that subject.

The samples were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The samples were segmented into T-units. A T-unit is defined as "one main

clause plus any subordinate clause or nonclausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it" (Hunt, 1970, 4). This unit of syntactic analysis is objective and easy to compute, and in the last ten years it has gained increasing recognition as a far more valid index of syntactic complexity than other measures, including sentence length.

Altogether, measures on six dependent variables were computed for each sample. These variables were: words per T-unit, clauses per T-unit, words per clause, adjective clauses per 100 T-units, adverb clauses per 100 T-units, and noun clauses per 100 T-units.

Table 1 (see Appendix) presents a comparison of the means of the subjects' classroom language and their speech among linguistic peers. The data as measured by all six dependent variables indicate a process of syntactic simplification in the classroom language. The subjects spoke in shorter clauses and used fewer subordinate clauses per T-unit when addressing their students than they did when speaking to highly proficient interlocutors. Multivariate analysis of variance performed on the data revealed that these differences are highly statistically significant ($p = < 0.0001$).

Table 2 compares the subjects' classroom language as it varied over the duration of the ten-week period during which the courses were taught. Time 1 represents classroom language samples collected during the second or third week of classes; Time 2 during the fifth or sixth week of classes, and Time 3 during the last two weeks of classes. The data suggest that the degree of syntactic complexity of the subjects' classroom speech was relatively stable over the ten-week period and that whatever progress was made by the students did not occasion an increase in the syntactic complexity of the language addressed to them by their teachers.

Table 3 summarizes the classroom language performance of the subjects according to the levels of instruction offered. The data show that the syntactic complexity of the classroom speech which the students heard varied as a function of the degree of proficiency which they were assumed to have. Simplification was most evident at the Beginner level, where the two teacher-trainees spoke almost invariably in short, simple sentences. Multivariate analysis of variance performed on the data indicates that (1) the level of proficiency which a class of students was assumed to have is a statistically significant ($p < 0.0227$) factor determining the syntactic complexity of the classroom language used by the teachers, and (2) the syntactic complexity of the oral language used by a teacher at one level was significantly less than the mean performance of the teachers at more advanced levels (the only exception was between the Intermediate and Advanced levels, where the same trend was apparent, but not to a statistically significant degree).

From the results of the present study, restricted though it was to the examination of selected syntactic dimensions of the classroom language of a small number of subjects teaching in one particular educational setting, a number of important implications nonetheless arise. First, the subjects' classroom language lends support to Ferguson's (1971) hypothesis that speech communities tend to have conventional varieties of "simplified" speech which speakers regard as appropriate for use when their interlocutors do not have full understanding of the language in use. In addition, the trend toward simplification noted in the data of the present study is similar to that found by Henzl (1973),

who used specific elicitation procedures to investigate the adjustments made by speakers of Czech when addressing students learning that language through formal classroom instruction.

In terms of a comparison of first and second language learning, the language used by the subjects in the present study in addressing their students was from the point of view of syntax strikingly similar to the language which adults use in their verbal interactions with children acquiring language. The emphasis which the nativist theory of language acquisition has placed on an innate, genetically-transmitted capacity which accounts for and shapes the language acquisition process has in some quarters fostered the idea that the raw linguistic data which is processed by the first language learner is essentially random. A number of researcher, however, whose work has been summarized by Landes (1975), have shown that when addressing children, adults and older children consistently adjust the syntax of their spoken language in the direction of greater simplicity. Thus, that part of the raw linguistic input which has its source in adult-child verbal interactions is more structured than might be supposed, and it is paralleled syntactically in formal second language learning by the nature of teacher-student verbal interactions.

The data from the present study also suggest that as students proceed through a sequence of formal language learning courses, they hear progressively more complex speech which ultimately approximates that used in normal adult verbal interactions in the target language. This progression from lesser to greater syntactic complexity is also characteristic of the language which is addressed to children during the years that they acquire their native language. Thus, while the exact schedule according to which adult linguistic input to children

changes syntactically has not been fully elaborated, those who argue that despite a number of superficial differences, second language learning is not qualitatively different from first language acquisition can nonetheless find support for their claim in terms of the similarity in the progressive stages of syntactic complexity to which first and second language learners are exposed through primary linguistic data.

Furthermore, as regards second language learning materials development, the principle that language drills should involve sentences which are increasingly longer and syntactically more complex (Stieglitz, 1973) is indirectly validated by the results of the present study. In view of the fact that teachers gear their own spoken language to the proficiency of their students, the claim that grading a series of oral manipulation drills from easy to difficult by itself leads to an "artificial" exposure to the target language is not defensible.

In contrast to a number of recent studies which have investigated formal second language acquisition with the focus on the learner, the present study has examined one dimension of the teacher's role in this learning process. Exactly how the classroom language of the foreign language teacher facilitates or otherwise influences second language learning is a question for future research. What is clearly shown by the present study, however, is that foreign language teachers' classroom language represents, at least in terms of syntax, a linguistic adjustment made in response to the communicative and pedagogical demands imposed by the setting in which it is used.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF SUBJECTS' CLASSROOM LANGUAGE AND SPEECH AMONG LINGUISTIC PEERS (BASELINE PERFORMANCE)

	NATURE OF LANGUAGE SAMPLE	
VARIABLE	BASELINE	CLASSROOM
w/T	10.97	6.19
c/T	1.60	1.20
w/c	6.84	5.10
AJ/100	11.59	2.54
AV/100	20.27	5.33
N/100	28.54	11.16

w/T = words per T-unit
c/T = clauses per T-unit
w/c = words per clause
AJ/100 = adjective clauses per 100 T-units
AV/100 = adverb clauses per 100 T-units
N/100 = noun clauses per 100 T-units

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF SUBJECTS' CLASSROOM LANGUAGE BY TIME OF TAPING

	TIME OF TAPING		
VARIABLE	T_1	T_2	T_3
w/T	6.45	6.06	6.05
c/T	1.24	1.19	1.16
w/c	5.13	5.03	5.15
AJ/100	3.19	2.09	2.35
AV/100	7.20	4.00	4.78
N/100	13.30	11.14	9.04

T_1 = Weeks 2-3; T_2 = Weeks 5-6; T_3 = Weeks 9-10

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF SUBJECTS' CLASSROOM LANGUAGE BY LEVEL

	LEVEL			
VARIABLE	BEGINNER	UPPER BEGINNER	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
w/T	4.30	5.75	6.45	8.26
c/T	1.02	1.14	1.24	1.38
w/c	4.20	5.04	5.18	5.98
AJ/100	0.00	1.46	2.26	6.47
AV/100	0.76	3.64	8.40	8.51
N/100	1.60	6.92	13.54	20.91